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SUBJECT: GNP DEFEAT IN BY-ELECTIONS REFLECTS PUBLIC ANGST

11. (SBU) Summary: The ruling Grand National Party's (GNP) poor showing in the June 4 by-election -- on the same day as President Lee Myung-bak's 100th day in office - is largely a reflection of public dissatisfaction with the new administration. The GNP party won only nine of the 52 local seats up for grabs, and local press are contrasting the GNP's failure to win a single seat in Seoul with their landslide victories in the capital region in the April 9 general election. End Summary.

What Was At Stake and Who Won

12. (SBU) The final voting results, which came out on June 5, reflected ongoing political backlash over U.S. beef imports. Out of the total 52 seats (9 county/district chief posts, 29 provincial and municipal council seats, 14 township council seats) up for grabs in the June 4 by-election, the GNP won only nine; the main opposition United Democratic Party (UDP) secured 23. This is a big set back for the ruling party, which had won every local election since the 2004 parliamentary elections.

Low Voter Turnout

13. (SBU) Voter turnout for the by-elections was 23.2 percent, the second lowest in local election history, despite the National Election Commission (NEC) extending voting hours until 8 pm from the usual 6 pm. According to an NEC official, the low turnout had been expected to a certain extent because the by-elections came shortly after the presidential and parliamentary elections. Bad weather also contributed to the low turnout.

Post-Local Election Politics Focus on Beef

14. (SBU) UDP leader Sohn Hak-kyu called the results a "warning" to the Lee Myung-bak administration and emphasized his party's consolidated drive to push for renegotiations of the U.S.-ROK beef deal. The GNP, in a statement issued by spokesperson Cho Yoon-sun, also acknowledged that, "there was insufficient communication between the GNP and citizens," and that "we humbly accept the public sentiment reflected in the by-elections." Widespread perceptions among all parties that the elections reflected public dissatisfaction with President

Lee Myung-bak's handling of state affairs -- especially the U.S. beef deal -- makes it likely that the GNP will increase its pressure on the Blue House to expand the scope of the Cabinet reshuffle plan expected in the near future.

Comment

15. (SBU) The Lee Myung-bak Administration is in trouble, and it is unclear if anyone on his team can fashion a political bailout before it is too late. After the results were announced, Lee reportedly told his staff to prepare countermeasures. Nobody believes there is a magic bullet because a series of apologies, proposals and policy ideas have all fallen flat.

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